

Voices
from the
GapsAlma Luz
Villanueva

“

*Poetry for me is the source, the mother tongue
... the sun, moon and stars*

— Alma Luz Villanueva

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Biography

Alma Luz Villanueva was born in Lompoc, California on October 4, 1944. Growing up in the Mission district of San Francisco she lived, until eleven years of age, with her Mexican grandmother. She never knew her father, and after her grandmother died, Villanueva was raised by her mother and aunt through her adolescent years. She dropped out of high school in 10th grade to have her first child, and had her second child at age 17. She lived on welfare in a brutal public housing project in San Francisco and was married to a violent man. “So that period of my life was an early drama, quite a challenge to survive, to survive. So I didn’t write anything from age 13 to 26 because I was struggling for survival,” she said.

Villanueva went on to complete a post-secondary education at City College of San Francisco and Norwich University and earned a M.F.A. in 1984 from Vermont College. She has held writer-in-residence positions at Cabrillo College, University of California at Irvine, Stanford University, San Francisco State College, and the University of California at Santa Cruz. She currently lives in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and teaches in the M.F.A. in Creative Writing Program at Antioch University, Los Angeles.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1949
- * Chicana poet, novelist, and short story writer

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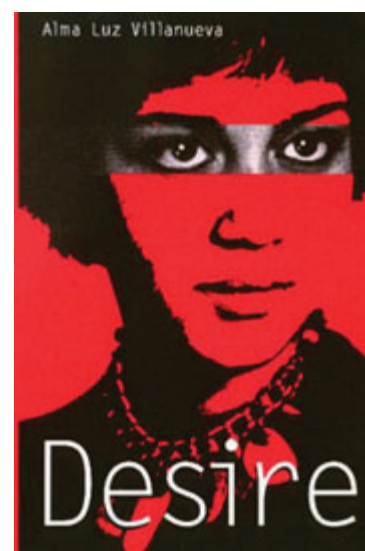


Alma Luz Villanueva

Biography continued

Her books of fiction include *Ultraviolet Sky*, which won the 1989 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, and *Weeping Women: La Llorona and Other Stories*. Her collection of poems won the University of California at Irvine's Third Chicano Literary Prize in 1977, and more recent awards include the 1994 Latino Literature Prize for *Planet with Mother May I?*. Other collections of poetry include *Blood Root*, *La Chingada*, and *Lifespan*. Villanueva's autobiographical early poems were drawn from a poverty-stricken and difficult childhood. Also represented in her early writings, however, are love, perseverance and the strength found among women. The sanctity of female community is a common thread in Villanueva's writings, as well as is the longing for voice and the pursuit to be heard. Her style is raw and romantic, painfully honest and hopeful. Even with fiction, Villanueva manages to avoid the pitfalls of writing about complex characters and their relationships.

The appeal of Villanueva's writing is the universality of the dominant themes that apply to all readers regardless of race or gender. The search for identity, the exploration of race, gender and sexuality, and the pursuit of wholeness are common, human quests that make Villanueva's work not only relevant but significant as well. Her collection of poetry *Desire*, for instance, reveals the power of language as a connecting force to culture, each other and the world in general. The topic of language is just a facet in the quest for authenticity and self-acceptance that Villanueva explores in her provocative writing.





Alma Luz Villanueva

Biography continued

While Villanueva concentrates on the journey of life with the embracing of its struggles and victories, she is not negligent in remembering the history and heritage that has largely formed both her and her characters. In *Blood Root*, for example, Villanueva draws from her Yaqui Indian ancestry to explore the power of Nature and the strength of a matriarchal society. In one of her favorite literary, and life, journeys, Villanueva draws wisdom from her ancient culture to guide feminine dreams to fruition in a male and white dominated world. There is also comfort to be found in the myths of culture. Luna, from *Luna's California Poppies*, finds solace in her diary entries directed at la Virgen de Guadalupe. Another female, Chicana protagonist in *Ultraviolet Sky*, Rosa, finds comfort and strength in the myths of her culture and again addresses the conflict of finding and keeping identity within the confines of race and gender. In essence, Villanueva and her stories are both compelling and relatable and the reader will be taken on a journey with her characters, and ultimately, with Villanueva herself.

La Chingada (1985) is an epic poem that presents the mythical figures of the violated and abused women, a concept that is well-known to most Mexican-Americans and shows an accurate depiction of female history and the troubles of modern Chicanas. The book focuses on how the destructive masculine hierarchy has brought down Chicanas and taken away from their cultural importance. It is cleverly composed, and gives emotional imagery to display Villanueva's passion toward this topic. Her life experience in this particular area also adds validity to her statement.

Ultraviolet Sky (1988) is a feminist novel about a woman, Rosa, who struggles with and against her husband, son, and female best friend to make changes in her life. *Ultraviolet Sky* (1988) is reviewed by Holly Smith in *500 Great Books by Women: A Reader's Guide*, edited by Erica Bauermeister, Jesse Larsen, and Holly Smith, which contains reviews of works from the 13th Century to the present. The novel is used as a textbook in the U.S. and abroad.

Villanueva's second novel, *Naked Ladies* (1994), thoroughly represents the complexity and dichotomies associated with real life. This novel examines the trials and tribulations through which human beings must navigate, including the intricacies of human relationships. Everyday matters are juxtaposed with raw, societal issues such as alcoholism, cancer, domestic and racial violence, incest, infidelity, rape and suicide. The novel is set in the San Francisco Bay area and focuses on Alta's relationships with her three close girlfriends and her husband Hugh, all of which have are realistically portrayed with an array of strengths and weaknesses.



Alma Luz Villanueva

Biography continued

Villanueva sends the message that everyone, regardless of his or her racial or ethnic background, is united by the struggle that is human existence. Readers are left with the feeling that they too have “experienced the pain, exhilaration and wisdom of a life fully lived” (Wheatwind 25).

In *Weeping Woman: La Llorona and Other Stories* (1994), Villanueva concentrates on the painful aspects of the female existence in her novel *Weeping Woman*. Sexual themes are prevalent and explicit. This collection of stories examines controversial topics such as drug abuse, prostitution and murder. Female sexuality is explored, especially regarding the manifestations of childhood sexual abuse, rape and incest in the development of sexuality. In addition, Villanueva portrays the effect upon daughters of women who have experienced these types of sexual violence. This combined with negative forms of female sexuality, such as prostitution, has a profound effect on the budding sexuality of the younger generation and thus Villanueva illustrates how the ills of sexual ills of society are perpetuated.

Desire (1998) is a love letter to the world. In poems that are lyrical, humorous, and gritty, Villanueva embraces all of life’s experiences -- the bittersweet experience of motherhood, affection for people and animals, ritual, death, grief, and exaltation. Her poems fuse the personal and political, anchoring the abstract in the sensual world and revealing a belief in the power of language to connect us to the world, to each other, and to ourselves.

Luna’s California Poppies (2002), which is written in the form of a diary, gives voice to Luna Luz Villalobos as both child and adult as she struggles through the many trials of her life, which include abandonment and racism. As a child, Luna finds solace through her writing, and, as an adult, she finds strength. The subject matter is daring and the writing is bold. Like Villanueva’s own life, this is an inspiring story of survival.

Vida (2002) is Alma Villanueva’s most recent installment in her already impressive collection of literature. She uses her love of life and amazing poetic skills to construct a collection of poems that celebrate womanhood, love, and children, all without destructing the readers concept of man, like so many other feminist writers have done before. Villanueva draws themes from her Indian heritage and as Jane Canin points out, “Vida is a diary of the healing dreams of a 21st century Shaman.” Villanueva uses a wide range of emotions to relate to her audience and display her own life experiences.



Alma Luz Villanueva

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